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ASSOCIATIONS FOR HELPING THE BLIND.¹

THE blind enjoy the compassion of their fellow-men perhaps more than many others that are suffering under the difficulties of life, likely because people consider a blind man a person much more unfortunate than other sufferers. Still this consideration was also the reason why the blind have been thought for such a long time unable to do any work, destined to gain their livelihood by beggary, because it is not much more than a hundred years since the first institution for teaching the blind was established at Paris. But in this short period of a century what great success has been attained! Blind children are not only able now to enjoy the same education as full-sighted ones, but in some countries they are even obliged to visit an institution in order to get the same education as their seeing brethren. It is true, writing and reading is rather a modern invention for the blind, and their books are still expensive, and therefore small in number; but by copying out what they cannot get printed for want of demand, by gathering these copied books into libraries in order to enable a greater number of them to read these books, they have not only been able to acquire a higher education, but the number of those that attend a university, and even pass examinations, increases from year to year.

About a year ago, a small international union was formed under the name "*Association des aveugles étudiants*," the object of which is not only to establish a scientific library for blind students, but still more to assist each other and to help also the poor among the blind, not only to study, but to get a position after leaving their studies, so that a blind student may no longer be an object of surprise, but that the number of those who have become useful members of society may increase. In these endeavors America is by no means marching behind the European nations.

¹ The author of this article is a blind gentleman in Leipzig, who has won a good position as a teacher of modern languages.

It is true, the number of those that have acquired a position in which they can earn what they want for life through what they have studied in science is small; but we are still in the beginning of this movement. A few years ago a blind man was hardly able to visit a university and pass an examination. The general want of confidence is perhaps the greatest obstacle that a blind man meets, and it is difficult to persuade our friends that they do us a much greater favor by giving us occupation, even for small pay, than by giving us presents.

It will be a good while before even a poor blind man may earn through his mental work, in which he must not be inferior to full-sighted people, just as much as they; and till then it must be our endeavor to render those happy that are forced to gain their livelihood by manual occupation, in which we cannot deny they are a good deal inferior to their seeing brethren.

What is the state of these unfortunate people now, and how are they to be assisted? Most blind people are much less independent than others. In early childhood their kind mothers will guard them from the rough approach of other boys. Then they are shut out from life by their education in an institution where they learn some trade. When they leave school, in which everything was arranged according to their state, shall we then expect them to be able to meet all the difficulties of life to which they are entire strangers? The real education for life through experience, which any other child has in the house of its parents without learning it, is still to come. In what way can a blind man earn his livelihood? Those who are not studying may do it in two different ways—either by music or tuning pianos, or by the practice of a trade. In music they are much less inferior to seeing people than in a trade. Their talent is mostly at least as good as that of a common musician, and their diligence often greater. They have musical notes which they can read with their fingers, and though the number of those that are playing in an orchestra is still small, as organists, music teachers, and even pianists they are performing their work well. But the state of the poor working blind man, and still more of the girls among them, is much less agreeable.

The trades they learn are mostly caning chairs, making brushes, baskets, ropes, paper sacks, and some similar articles in which a man with full sight can earn but very little. Besides, a seeing workman can add to his work many things to make it appear nicer, which will increase its price. Also selling and getting new orders is more difficult for a blind man as long as he must work alone.

Saxony is an industrial country. It has many great manufacturing, and large parts of the country are inhabited chiefly by weavers and people that have only a small income. In such districts the number of blind people is not small, and, what is still more serious, they are very likely to become beggars. Not seldom they are even engaged by their own families, which are poor and of a low education, to live in this manner, which, no doubt, will bring them a little better income than making brushes or baskets. They do not mind that in this way they will fall entirely into immorality, and what they learned in the institution of Dresden may be lost in a few years. Such cases must be prevented, and, in order to prevent them, it is the first duty of the inspector at Dresden to find out whether it would be wise to send the pupil back to his people after leaving the institution. Then he must take care to find out what may be the most successful trade for him; and this he begins already while he is in school. After he has completed his studies, he remains in one of the large workshops of the institution, to complete learning his trade, because he must know it well enough to perform it without any master. This aim he has attained when he is eighteen or twenty years old, and then he is sent either to his family or to some other place which the inspector considers fit for him. How can he get on there? This question is more difficult to answer than many think. Most of them lack in their lives one of the most important periods of a seeing workman, the period when he was a journeyman. He has learned his trade as well as a blind man can, but he hardly knows anything of business life. Thus arranging a business himself is almost impossible. Even when kind friends would do it for him, he hardly understands how to meet his clients. Although

he may have a benefactor who understands business, he must remain a workman laboring separated from others. There are, to be sure, several who have a business which they themselves can carry on, and which is flourishing, and who are married and able to gain means for their families; but these belong mostly to those happier people who have a brother or a cousin with whom they may live, and who will teach them business life. Still, though working alone, the blind tradesman is never left alone. The institution of Dresden will take care of him throughout his life. When it cannot allow him to return to his family, or if he has no father or mother to live with, it will find a suitable place for him, where he may spend his days for a moderate sum. That is usually a simple family which will not make him a present, but which will also not earn a great deal through him. Not seldom it is a blind man who has a shop himself. There are even some colonies of blind people working together. The institution will buy materials for them. It will advertise their work, try to find connections with manufacturers for them, and, if they cannot sell all their work, it will do it for them. None of them receive regular assistance, but most of them get now and then financial help.

The blind workman is at a disadvantage working alone. Measuring and other processes which a man who can see does not need, will take him a good deal of time, and still his work very often is not quite what is expected. Besides, the making of baskets, brushes, ropes, paper sacks, stockings, or similar things are occupations which are pretty low paid even to seeing people. Thus it is easily understood that the income of the blind tradesman must be rather low.

The blind people of the working classes are rather modest, and not much is needed to make them happy—just a family of which they are considered a member, and which takes from them the chief difficulties of their trade and of their lives. There have been institutions for them, in which they were well cared for, but a man does not like to live only in order to eat and drink, but he wishes to have his share in the life of his fellow-men. Excluded from life and living as a monk, he feels fully his dependence; he feels how unhappy a blind person is.

Saxony has been the place where this excellent idea has not only been fully grasped, but where the inspector and the teachers of the central institution made it their duty to organize a real system. It is true, what the Germans pay for their poor people, even for their blind, is much less than what the Americans do; but the advantage of the German method is that it is much more centralized. They must consider: How can we arrange best with the little we have at our disposal? And besides, when all is in the hands of one great committee that can give commands, they have the power to carry out their decisions. And everything they arrange is done in a more centralized manner than if done by separated committees, and thus the small sum the Germans dispose of can often do just as much good as the greater gifts of America.

It is not an easy task to form a connection between all the blind tradesmen of one kingdom and their superintendent. These blind people have not very high education, and thus often do not risk stating their demands, and the less modest ones request things which one would call superfluous. But also on this side a very ingenious arrangement has been made. Each blind tradesman has his guardian, who is usually a rich gentleman—a manufacturer or merchant who is not too proud to care continually for one or more blind persons. Whenever they have a request for an expensive tool, a new coat which they cannot pay for themselves, they tell their guardian, who, after examining the request, will write a word to the institution and is sure that the want will be met. The father-like friendship of a wealthy and well-educated gentleman will keep them from mingling with bad society; and this happy arrangement costs nothing at all.

We hardly need to add that the institution at Dresden is anxious to spread more and more among the public the knowledge of what the blind can do, by lectures, exhibitions of their work, and articles in the papers. In other German countries this system is more or less completely introduced, and these ideas are spreading outside of Germany. Committees consisting of benevolent seeing people and better-educated blind ones

have been founded in these later years to assist the institutions in their work by taking part of the work on their own shoulders, and the formation of societies of the blind themselves is very useful. Helpful arrangements can be established, as libraries, reading-circles, and concerts.

And how is the state of the poor among the American blind people? This question will doubtless rise in the minds of those of our readers who have a heart for their fellow-men who are suffering under the difficulties of fate. Their education is by no means inferior to that of the Germans, because a good number of blind teachers are employed in the blind schools (in Germany very few). And where there is a lack of educated people there is also a want of means for educating themselves and others. Besides, music can much easier be taught to them than in Germany, because those of the German blind pupils that cannot learn enough to become teachers or organists are in great danger as to their morality, as evening parties, in which they might play the piano, are hardly ever arranged without drinking beer slowly during the whole of the evening. This danger does not exist for the American blind musicians, whose number is therefore much larger. The American blind girls are also much more than anywhere else occupied in the household.

The compassion for the blind is by no means less in America than in Germany; we are also sure that their energy in getting on is not inferior to that of others. But they are more isolated than the Germans. To find a family for each of them where they would not be considered as poor blind people, but as members of that family, to get a homelike place for them, would be a very thankful work for such a committee. As soon as such a committee is arranged, a good many things may be done for them which are rather difficult today. Libraries that enable them to complete their studies, connection between manufacturers or associations and the working blind people, even assisting the musicians, tuners, and typewriters in finding places, would then be much easier.

RICHARD HAUPTVOGEL.

LEIPZIG, GERMANY.